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Forum

The Epistemics of Policymaking: from Technocracy to Critical Pragmatism in the UN Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

This essay examines epistemological tensions inherent in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) project. The clash between the totalizing logic of the SDGs and growing populist antipathy for expert governance can be better understood and potentially mediated through a critical pragmatist view. For the SDGs, technocratic fundamentalism not only serves the ambition for universality but also ensures epistemic stability in problem framing and protects the interests that benefit from it. However, technocratic fundamentalism also undermines the mechanics of SDG localization, working against their stated aims of justice, transparency, and institutional equity; in this way, a global development agenda shaped by myopic epistemics does itself no favors on elements by which it proposes to be measured. Compounding these epistemic tensions, anti-expert and anti-intellectual populism is confronting the credibility of technocracy and governance more generally, with possible implications for national and local policymaking informed by the SDGs. The concept of critical pragmatism, as articulated by Forester, presents both a provocation to the SDG project and a vision for imparting a more participatory orientation to it. This essay elaborates on these points.

Keywords

sustainable development goals, SDGs, technocracy, critical pragmatism, public policy

1. SDG technocracy: process, program, and politics

At the UN's Third International Conference on Financing for Development in 2015, Co-Facilitator George Talbot, the Permanent Representative of Guyana, stated about financing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that "politics cannot always be anticipated and are best left to the politicians, who should be allowed to resolve the remaining issues" (Leone 2015). This statement instantiates the tension between technocracy and politics in global development. While the SDGs reflect a totalizing and rationalist¹ vision for advancing policy goals, operational guidance on local implementation is suggested by an array of over 200 indicators² that act in effect as policy nudges (Hartley 2019). In this way, the translation of a global development vision into highly contextualized settings illustrates the core-periphery dynamic long characterizing development initiatives. It also reveals new opportunities to understand tensions between technocratic authority and the current era's rising assertiveness of local and national identity movements. This essay begins by examining SDG technocracy through the lens of Marsh and McConnell's (2010) three dimensions of policy success. It continues with a discussion about the role of technocracy in framing policy issues and the inherent epistemic instability that attends it. The essay concludes by examining 'critical pragmatism' as both a diagnostic and prescriptive tool for SDG localization.

At a theoretical level, the SDGs are the 21st century expression of the 'modern project' – an Enlightenment-style agenda that, despite its claimed independence from dogma, embraces the rule-sets of rationalism, liberalism, and internationalism (Dunne 2010). Actualizing the totalizing and rationalist vision of the SDGs is a 'positivist' and 'technocratic' orientation. Positivism refers here to a theory of knowledge in which "reality exists and is driven by laws of cause and effect that can be discovered through empirical testing of hypotheses" (Fischer 1998; p. 143); positivism can manifest itself as a paradigm (Kuhn 1962) or a 'culture' (Ryan 2015). Technocracy applies positivist perspectives to understanding and addressing policy problems, with theoretical roots in the policy sciences, managerialism, and public choice theory (Fischer 1990).

In practice, the SDG apparatus comprises cadres of technocrats and experts generating policy ideas and ways to measure their implementation.³ Viewed critically, such cadres substantiate their advice through the credentials of their members while having the effect of de-platforming alternative ideas and perspectives at the agenda-setting stage. These cadres also appear to uphold, consciously or otherwise, a deeply embedded epistemological legacy (i.e., positivism) that shapes policy thinking. However, the logic of these efforts is confronted by ongoing scholarly critiques of policy knowledge construction as a biased exercise. According to Kuecker and Hartley (2020a):

The vestiges of Enlightenment rationalism continue to privilege the problem-solving epistemic, as perpetuated by the power-knowledge nexus and valorized by 'common-sense' narratives about evidence-based policy. In a credibility-generating and self-referential feedback loop, experts define the parameters of policy advice, fortify themselves against competing or alternative forms of knowledge, and leverage the resulting monopoly on influence to re-assert validation (p. 5).

1 – Substituting for the term 'rational,' 'rationalist' implies a distinctive epistemological orientation that invokes the objectivity of 'rationality' to legitimize philosophies or practices based on underlying value-frames.

2 – <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/11803Official-List-of-Proposed-SDG-Indicators.pdf> (accessed 22 July 2020).

3 – This cadre is constitutive of a broader 'power-knowledge nexus' that includes creators of knowledge (scholars and consultants), influencers of policy (lobbyists and advocacy-focused think tanks; see Abelson 2019), shapers of public opinion (the commentariat and 'public intellectuals'), and facilitators of policy reality (politicians and policymakers), among others.

The power-knowledge nexus and its constituent technocratic cadres, whether within the SDG apparatus or elsewhere, exist in no value-free vacuum (Sen 2004). The nexus frames problem definitions to fit solutions that serve particular interests, with a common example being the narrative about inefficiency in government-provided public services and the primacy of market paradigms in addressing it (see New Public Management; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). The nexus also adaptively protects its legitimacy by co-opting emergent political sentiments, as evident in deference to virtues like inclusion, deliberation, and participation expressed by post-New Public Management paradigms (see New Public Service; Denhardt and Denhardt 2000). In policy practice and in the political economy of sustainability more broadly, the substantial and largely unchallenged influence of mainstream governance paradigms, the logic of coordinated and totalizing global policy initiatives, and the maneuvers of the power-knowledge nexus can be understood through a meta-scale version of Marsh and McConnell's (2010) three dimensions of policy success: process, program, and politics. The remainder of this section explores these dimensions as they relate to the SDGs.

The *process* dimension is exhibited through, among other things, "legitimacy in the formation of choices: that is, produced through...values of democracy, deliberation and accountability" (Marsh and McConnell 2010; p. 571). As the most coherent single vision currently articulated by the global development community, the SDG project presents its drafting process as an exercise in endogenous collective or participatory action – even in the absence of any explicit mention of democracy in the most recent SDG official report⁴ and in the official description of SDG #16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions).⁵ The SDGs' implicit deference to the principles of equity and inclusion is expressed through performative overtures to stakeholder engagement in problem definition, options formulation, and program delivery (Fox and Stoett 2016; Gellers 2016; Sénit et al. 2016). However, the terms of this engagement are not entirely impartial. As Durnova et al. (2016) note in reference to political engagement more generally, "all collective action, such as building a coalition to support a given proposal, is never natural, obvious, or neutral; on the contrary, it is always difficult and costly" (p. 38). Given the coordination needs of the SDG project's global scale, representative crowdsourcing of ideas would seem prohibitively complex. As such, localization – the city- or regional-scale interpretation and implementation of SDG targets – emerged as the preferred approach to building process legitimacy. However, localization efforts are geographically heterogenous and at the global scale reflect the entire continuum of political systems, confounding technocratic efforts to build an empirically-based success-narrative that is universal and consistent.

The *program* dimension references the ability of a policy initiative to meet desired outcomes. Indicator-based monitoring on SDG effectiveness and efficiency targets legitimizes the empiricist approach and technocratic discourse around which SDG outcomes and successes are defined. The narrative-building mechanism of the program dimension is the institutional reinforcement of declared policy visions and technocratic pathways. For example, iterations of the UN's 15-year development agendas – which so far include the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015) and SDGs (2015-2030) – justify continued action through failure in achieving some targets and success in achieving others. Whether in the success or failure of program

4 – <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2020.pdf> (accessed 7 July 2020). There is no explicit mention in the 2020 Sustainable Development Goals Report of the terms 'democracy' and 'participation,' or their derivatives. 'Deliberative' is mentioned once, in reference to elected or representative councils. 'Representation' and its derivatives, when used in reference to political processes, is mentioned 11 times, mostly in accounts about the election of women to elected or representative councils. 'Inclusion' and 'inclusive' are mentioned 21 times, mainly as titles for individual goals; neither is defined or elaborated.

5 – <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/goal-16/> (accessed 7 July 2020).

dimensions, the SDGs' technocratic discourse is locked-in, maintains its urgency, and self-reinforces through cycles of need and resolution.

The final of Marsh and McConnell's three dimensions is *political* success. The standards and measurement of political success differ between the SDG project's global vision and national or subnational contexts. Macro-level political success for the SDGs is determined by the perceptions of global institutional actors and stakeholders about project legitimacy. National buy-in is implied through the SDG ratification process. However, no formalized and systematic connection at the agenda-setting level appears to meaningfully exist between the SDGs and local governments. Material buy-in at the local level is observable only when cities and other subnational governments reference or engage with the SDGs in policymaking (Hartley 2019). At the same time, the fate of the SDGs' political legitimacy, at any level of government, is arguably coterminous with that of the sustainability discourse more generally; for example, political debate rages about the degree to which governments at any level should commit public resources to address climate change. It is not clear, however, to what degree criticisms of the SDGs specifically are made in such debates (particularly at the local level), aside from general dissatisfaction about the subordination of local sovereignty to global interests (for discussions about this type of political agitation, see Ettinger 2020; LeRiche and Opitz 2019; Marschall and Klingebiel 2019; Lockwood 2018). While the sovereignty debate bears on the popular political acceptability of the SDGs, the legitimacy of the SDGs as perceived by local or national political leadership is contingent on the flexibility with which the SDGs can be discursively reframed to serve particular political and developmental objectives.

The process-program-politics perspective illuminates power dynamics in the discourses of global development. SDG legitimization can be seen as an exercise in hybrid pragmatism: the self-certitude of numbers and totalizing vision of macro-level policy goals are combined with stated deference to context through localization. From a political economy perspective, the measurement and subjective framing of SDG success differs among global, national, and local interests; this is the same challenge that has revealed itself in decades of development practice. In the face of contested declarations about success, the SDG discourse seeks to fortify itself against critical pushback by specifying indicator-based benchmarking and thereby disciplining local interpretation. However, this normalizing practice is impeded by substantial cross-country variation in depth, consistency, and methods of implementation and indicator measurement.⁶ The SDGs' discursive bias is therefore vulnerable to critique not only on political grounds but also on epistemological ones. Across policy domains both within and outside the development sphere, there are numerous ways to define and measure success; according to Nicklin (2019), "freed from numerical constraints, [policy] successes can be acknowledged in their multitudes" (p. 188). Given that implementation is currently the only arena for meaningful local engagement with the SDGs (Glass and Newig 2019), power imbalances can be observed through the prism of core-periphery governance relationships and well-studied tensions between the mechanics and politics of policymaking. At the SDG visioning stage, alternative discourses about the causes of the sustainability crisis, particularly those that indict an economic system serving powerful and myopic interests, are largely invisible.

2. Technocracy and its discontents

Anti-expert and anti-intellectual populism on one side of the political spectrum, and anti-capitalist sentiment on the other, is confronting long-entrenched forms of governance includ-

6 — <https://sdg-tracker.org/> (accessed 30 March 2020).

ing those steeped in technocratic logic. Power imbalances and epistemological rigidity endure amidst the (often perfunctory) exercise of stakeholder engagement, suggesting underlying tensions at the confluence of the SDGs' high-concept goals, more detailed targets, and action-focused indicators. Global policy visions, as products of a high-modern technocratic exercise, are coercively imposed across politically distinct micro-contexts through the institution of localization. To explore this dynamic, this section discusses the conceptual provenance of technocracy as a backdrop for understanding the politics of epistemic disruption and pushback.

2.1 Conceptual provenance of technocracy

The entrenched credibility of technocracy in many policymaking circles draws from a deep intellectual legacy. Long mainstream in research about public policy and administration, deductivist positivism appeals via technocratic logic to the practical needs of policymakers and politicians. It also well complements the measurement- and efficiency-focused reform ethic of administrative managerialism and periodic reinterpretations thereof. Connecting clearly defined problems with elegantly calibrated solutions, positivism relies on a constructed faith in the 'common sense' of empiricist governance, an idea timeless in both its allure and ability to reproduce power asymmetries (Riggsby 2019). However, policy issues having a high degree of 'wickedness' (Hartley et al. 2019; Head 2019) and 'problemacity' (lacking in structure; see Turnbull and Hoppe 2019) elude full reduction to measurable terms and are thus mismatched with positivist, technocratic, and even managerialist ways of thinking and governing (Scott 1998). These types of problems confound an often willfully myopic epistemic that constructs and reshapes problem discourses to suit elite interests and available policy instruments.

By nature and intent, positivism sees only what is legible based on its own terms; encoded frames limit its field of analytical vision while effectively dismissing unmeasured context. In response, theoretical alternatives have emerged under the broad banner of postpositivism; these perspectives claim to better attend non-quantifiable factors shaping the contexts of policymaking, including political and social constructions of policy problems (Dryzek 2002). Carrying this response further, the 'argumentative' or 'critical' turn in policy studies, receiving scholarly attention primarily from the early 1990s onward, exemplifies postpositivism through discourse analysis and a focus on language, communications, and their service to power (Fischer and Forester 1993). In its often inductive approach, postpositivism also accounts for subaltern discourses that escape the gaze of rigid analytical frames.

That policymaking remains a purely technocratic undertaking is, however, an illusion. Policy tools and instruments – long the currency of technocracy – are said to “reflect the political culture” (Schneider and Ingram 1990, p. 526) and “are mediated by wider features of a political system” (Dunlop and Radaelli 2019, p. 130). Technocratic systems and policy design logics emerge from social and value-laden settings; neither materializes from a mythical purity of logic but is fashioned in politically and epistemically contested environments. Political realities lamented as ‘messy’ distractions often challenge the mechanics and logic of technocratic processes; as such, politics can destabilize truth-claims that appear to be objective ‘common sense’ but are in practice the product of problem constructs serving elite interests. Technocratic discourses can be seen as normative values that ossified into received wisdom; the privileged stead of this wisdom is protected not violently by the state but benignly and even obliviously by passive popular consensus, ideological self-disciplining, and social or cultural sanctioning. Examples are the practically unassailable institutions of capitalism and democracy; in the United States as in many other countries, opposing either is largely seen as irredeemably unpatriotic.

2.2 The politics of epistemic disruption

Interests behind the political and commercial imperative to define, measure, and solve policy problems seek to cast technocratic fundamentalism as benevolent scientism. The empiricist language of traditional policy analysis, embodying a ‘common-sense’ understanding about problems while ostensibly transcending ideology (Majone 1989), sidesteps political pushback without explicitly dismissing it. However, the practical drawback of alternative epistemological approaches in the mold of postpositivism is that they do not “connote a well-defined recipe book for doing policy analysis” (Dryzek, 2002; p. 32) and are thus consigned largely to the idle chatter of scholarship. In the absence of practicable alternatives, applied positivism continues to deepen its influence by leveraging the growing methodological sophistication of computing, scenario modeling, and technical forecasting. The accompanying empirical certitude privileges positivism among elite political and commercial circles, with increasingly convenient opportunities to operationalize and mainstream it (Kuecker and Hartley 2020b). While technocracy doubles-down on its positivist and managerialist logic, pushback may slowly be congealing into a techno-skepticism or ‘tech-lash’ (Krutka et al. 2020; Vraga and Tully 2019; Lynch 2007) that suggests insidious structural faults.⁷ These mounting tensions threaten to frustrate technology-based instrumental-rationalist efforts to frame policy problems, but the old order is unlikely to capitulate without a fight.

As a countervailing force emerging not from constructivist scholarship but from raw populist grievance, pushback against technocracy and its expression in policy logic has progressed from simmer to boil. The current manifestation of populism presents itself through a piquant whiff of anti-intellectualist rhetoric about policy issues in which science plays a central role, including climate change, vaccinations, and virus mitigation (Amir Singh 2020). Whether the rising bluster against intellectual authority in government and science is only the panicky masculinist posturing of an aggrieved working class is better left to political sociology, but the public policy implications cannot be ignored. It is arguably no great leap of inference to anticipate similar skepticism against technology (e.g., surveillance, data security, and autonomous robotics) and against the broader process of mechanizing and metricizing society. When considering the targets of populist disdain, however, the connection between technology and predatory elitism has remained rhetorically incoherent until only recently.⁸ In scholarly circles, the connection relies analytically on a critical discourse that sees technology as a tool serving privileged interests while pacifying and even obstructing resistance. Such abstractions reflect the realities of populist pushback even if eluding full conceptual appreciation beyond the academy.

While categorically disparaging technocratic logic, the 21st century’s cohort of populist leaders builds its own credibility on instinctive, shoot-from-the-hip statesmanship in which experts are ridiculed and maligned as establishment operatives. In a profound paradox, the entrenchment of technocracy is in effect mediated by the seemingly nihilist politicization of received ‘truth;’ the science of policymaking appears increasingly subordinated to the politics thereof.

7 – The term ‘technofascism’ has emerged on both sides of the political spectrum: for American conservatives, it reflects a grievance against the alleged repression of conservative views by social media platforms like Twitter (Lewinski 2020); for critical sociologists, it reflects a claim that technology is being used by ethno-nationalist politicians to marginalize minority populations during the COVID-19 crisis (Bhattacharyya and Subramaniam 2020). Policy action appears poised to respond to such sentiments; in June 2020, Santa Cruz, California, became the first American city to ban the use of technology-enabled ‘predictive policing’ that was seen as racially biased (Sturgill 2020).

8 – In the United States, the testimony of Facebook Founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg before Congress in 2019 drew scorn and derision on a variety of unexpected grievances beyond the immediate topic. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/24/business/dealbook/mark-zuckerberg-facebook-libra.html> (accessed 24 July 2020).

This potentially accelerates the long-running erosion of trust in government (Citrin and Stoker 2018; Dalton 2005; Miller 1974) and the more recent erosion of trust in knowledge institutions and experts (Saarinen et al. 2019; Holst and Molander 2019; Baumgaertner et al. 2018). It also heralds a profound reckoning about the wisdom of experts as against that of ‘the masses,’ potentially destabilizing the credibility of knowledge both ‘in and of’ (Lasswell 1971) the policy process. There is no clear resolution. As Fischer argues (2020; 2019), scientific truth is weak tea for anti-science denialism. ‘Post-truth’ populism rarely engages scientific claims at a meaningful level, thus avoiding the likely prospect of losing debates held on empirical terms. Rather, the current strain of populism finds purchase in vilifying abstract bugbears like ‘big government,’ the ‘deep state,’ global authoritarian projects like the SDGs, and the perceived aloofness of political and intellectual elites (Kane and Patapan 2014). While such rhetoric appears bereft of substance, it has no less a political consequence and thus deserves further investigation across all contested policy domains including global development and sustainability.

3. SDG localization as ‘critical pragmatism’

The concept of critical pragmatism mounts a challenge to elite capture in endeavors like the SDGs while offering pathways for the adoption of participatory approaches. Forester (2013; p. 6) describes critical pragmatism through five dimensions: (i) focus on both process and outcome; (ii) skepticism of knowledge claims and sensitivity to interests and values; (iii) distinction among facilitating, moderating, and mediating in deliberative processes; (iv) recognition of the essence of conflicts rather than only the language of debates; and (v) orientation towards creative negotiation in pursuit of joint gains. Critical pragmatism is applicable to both current and ideal manifestations of the SDG project in that, at its core, the concept accounts for relationships among power, knowledge, and stakeholders. Indeed, SDG localization enlists a complex array of actors, institutional expectations, and values-based truth-claims – a policy arena that provides insights for understanding governance projects at any scale. This concluding section focuses primarily on the assertion of interests and the dynamics of visioning processes as they shape SDG outcomes.

Driving SDG localization is said to be the reflective, contextualized, and variegated pursuit of a common normative outcome. The reality is not as tidy. The ambition to generate global consensus for a set of high-level policy visions can be seen as an exercise in manufactured harmonization – a normative imaginary for which localization is tacked-on as a mediating and democratizing mechanism. The cacophonous political environment of global policymaking and its core-periphery dynamics are reflected in Forester’s (2013; p. 10) elaboration of critical pragmatism: “it...has to address actual possibilities – what we might really do – in situations characterized by deep distrust and suspicion, deep differences of interests and values, a good deal of fear and, often, anger, poor or poorly distributed information, and more.” Viewing the SDG project through this lens captures the ‘pragmatic’ in acknowledging unique implementation contexts and the ‘critical’ in acknowledging the privilege of a single policy vision that claims a consensus mandate while effectively limiting implementation pathways through discursively strict framings of ‘success.’

An objective realization of the SDGs in their visionary purity is unlikely, but the collective effect of incidental monitoring efforts (whether at the country or local level⁹) offers convenient

9 – Voluntary national reviews (VNRs) are undertaken by national governments to track progress on SDG implementation. Voluntary local reviews (VLRs) are the same for local or regional governments. <https://sdg.iisd.org/news/local-governments-commit-to-sdg-reporting-in-vlr-declaration/> (accessed 23 July 2020)

support for the claim that the SDGs are being approximately achieved and thus discursively validated. Technocratic observation creates its own reality about progress, but critical pragmatism intercedes by illuminating tensions between facts and values. From the perspective of local governments, SDG agenda-setting offered little meaningful or systematic engagement according to Forester's 'process' (collective agreement about visions and mechanics), but did confer distributed responsibility for 'outcomes' (meeting targets and reporting progress). In many cases, however, local buy-in appears not to require normative coercion – indeed, SDG values comport at a superficial level with those embraced by many relatively 'progressive' urban governments (Douglass et al. 2019; Einstein and Glick 2017). As long as these two align, however artificially, a seemingly imminent confrontation over power and influence can be conveniently delayed – with a discursive calm furthering the impression of progress and epistemic harmony.

The appeal to more meaningfully involve subnational governments reflects what Moloney and Stone (2019) argue, in other contexts, is the need to expand “analytical, theoretical, conceptual, and even our pedagogical approaches to include the kaleidoscope of global governance actors, levels of analysis, sectors, and concepts” (p. 104). Systematically soliciting the input of local governments, logistically complex though it may be, would add inclusivity to the SDG process, in particular by extending the influence of local actors from mere reinterpretation at the localization stage to strategic visioning at the agenda-setting stage. This provides a conduit for the 'critical' to shape the 'pragmatic' – and for the pragmatic to be more than a captive mechanism of technocratic discourses. This potential is currently unappreciated, as the value of strategic input is implicitly dismissed by claims that the interpretive implementation of the SDGs and the freedom to emphasize certain indicators sufficiently empower localities.

As the only portal through which participation has an opportunity to act on the SDGs, localization can be considered at best 'bounded' in that it is steered by indicators whose function, beyond measuring implementation, is to deliver normative guidance. Furthermore, the failure of countries to monitor implementation on all indicators can be considered a reflection not merely of limited capacity (a time-worn explanation for developmental failure) but of efforts among local elites and policymakers to shape discourses by regulating what is seen and unseen. The SDGs are thus a teachable moment for epistemic revolution: the means of understanding reality dictate the content of discourse and what fails to be measured is ignored. An illustration is the clash between science and religious belief. Australian immunologist Edward Steele argues in reference to a current scientific debate about biological origins that “the situation is reminiscent to the problem Galileo had with the Catholic priests of his time – most refused to look through his telescope to observe the moons of Jupiter.”¹⁰ The power to constrain the scope of inquiry limits not only the array of feasible solutions but also any pathways to alternative understandings about problems; new ideas are dead on arrival. Democratizing inputs in the sustainability problem-framing process can potentially loosen the epistemic gridlock described in this essay.

Critical pragmatism would appear to deserve currency in a crisis-gripped era characterized by complex problems and global-scale response efforts – and in many countries by what seems to be late-stage democracy reflected in political dissonance and stalemates over contentious policy tradeoffs. The act of constructing consensus knowledge and policy discourses around global problems itself exposes tensions between scientific expertise and democratic representation, reflecting Turnbull's (2013) concept of *problematology* (the political process of constructing problems and repressing policy views). The policy scientist or benevolent technocrat,

10 – <https://cosmosmagazine.com/space/astrobiology/the-return-of-panspermia/> (accessed 30 July 2020).

as an individual in fact-value dissonance (Torgerson 2019), is a synthesis of policy and politics but remains deductive in spirit. Nevertheless, the durability and flexibility of pragmatism as a broader concept is open to re-readings from multiple epistemological perspectives (Zittoun 2019).

In closing, technocracy has moved beyond its role as a method for understanding reality to now assertively delimit the policy community's field of vision and associated rule-set; what cannot be measured, constructed, and validated technocratically cannot be managed. This has led to a dire mismatch between totalizing policy discourses like the SDGs and the gritty realities of context-based governing in local settings where sustainability challenges are confronted firsthand. Highlighting this dilemma, Fischer (2007) argues that "the standard methods [of professional training in public policy] are designed for a techno-bureaucratic society, not for a participatory democracy" (p. 107). Politically applied epistemics serve the construction of preferred realities, in both a contravention of purely positivist standards and a bastardized manifestation of postpositivist ones. However, the dynamic and perpetual 'becoming' of social and environmental change, as ostensibly recognized by the SDG project but structurally ignored by its totalizing and epistemically exclusionary logic, calls for approaches to problem-framing that are flexible and contextualized without interest in universality. This invites fresh scholarly contemplation on the study of power and discourse in a global policy system intent on making society 'sustainable' for the uninterrupted perpetuation of capitalism. This system is now thrashing about in the clutches of practical and ideological complexity, a backdrop against which formal discussions about the next iteration of the global development agenda will eventually commence.

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